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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: EMBASSY COORDINATED MEETING ON UPDATE OF  
OGADEN SITUATION

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On December 14, the Ambassador hosted the fifth in a series of meetings of NGOs, UN agencies and donor countries, with the purpose of discussing and sharing information on the Ogaden. The general consensus was that access to the region by NGO groups has improved and that considerable food aid has moved to major towns and is beginning to reach distribution points in secondary centers. Additionally, food prices have stabilized and returning to pre-crisis levels, though food remains scarce in rural areas.

Participants agreed that interaction with the Ethiopia leadership and intervention by the international community (led by the U.S.) has sped humanitarian food deliveries to primary distribution points. However, participants all agreed that famine-like conditions with potentially high child mortality rates from malnutrition and disease (specifically measles) are still highly likely and that more food is urgently needed, especially to secondary distribution points in rural areas.

12. (SBU) Natural calamities including floods in the north, poor rains and drought in the south, and an invasion of desert locusts, is exacerbating the region's hardships. The group recognized that Somalia and the Ogaden are interlinked with ONLF and extremists using Somalia as a base for incursions into Ethiopia. Somaliland truckers report refusal to drive into rural areas due to landmines and insurgency/counterinsurgency operations. Post is working to develop new approaches to alleviate anticipated worsening of the situation in the region. A forthcoming USAID assessment team to the Ogaden is welcome and the U.S. continues to be the lead country with assistance now in excess of USD 43 million. END SUMMARY.

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U.S.-led intervention helpful  
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13. (SBU) The Ambassador hosted the fifth in a series of meetings on the Ogaden with NGOs, UN agencies and donor countries. The purpose of the meetings is to verify facts, coordinate efforts and develop approaches to improve conditions in the Somali region of Ethiopia. The group stated that access for NGOs and UN groups have improved to major urban areas, though significant restrictions remain on access to rural areas. WFP noted that food is being distributed to major towns along the main roads with 14,272

metric tons already dispatched into the Somali region. Food prices in the major towns have stabilized and are approaching pre-crisis levels, though rice prices remain high. U.S.-led efforts have resulted in greater response by the GOE to concerns raised by the international community.

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Potential Worsening Conditions Ahead  
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¶4. (SBU) The general consensus of the group, however, was that famine-like conditions with potentially high child mortality rates from malnutrition and disease (specifically measles) are still highly likely. The NGOs and USAID, in particular, raised concerns that food needs to reach secondary distribution points in rural areas very soon. The GoE-operated DPPA, which handles food distribution, also remarked to the U.S. and other groups, that more food is critically needed for secondary distribution points in the more remote rural areas and that more trucks are needed to deliver the food. WFP reports that 14,272 metric tons of food is insufficient and that 52,000 metric tons of food is needed now to meet the needs of 600,000 to 700,000 people out of the 4.2 million people in the Somali region of Ethiopia, and 1.2 million people living in the conflict zones.

¶5. (SBU) The UN agencies raised the necessity to monitor the distribution of food to ensure it is getting to the right people. NGOs continue to report bureaucratic delays in deploying to the region. While access has improved, there are still reports of trucks being delayed by the Ethiopian military due to lack of military escorts for the trucks entering the area and other bureaucratic delays. WFP and USAID reported that 60 trucks have waited for 20 days for military escorts. Such delays, the group stated, will mean that sufficient food will not get to the people most in need

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in a timely manner.

¶6. (SBU) USAID and the UN agencies raised concerns that severe malnutrition rates are likely increasing and child mortality rates are likely increasing as well. No specific numbers or rates are available, primarily due to the lack of assessment of the needs and limited access to the region. A concern was that measles and other diseases could increase child mortality rates due to the apparent increasing rates of malnutrition among children.

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Climatic Changes Add to Misery  
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¶7. (SBU) Compounding the poor prognosis for the region is climatic changes. USAID reported on locust problems in Fik, with reports of flooding in parts of the north and drought conditions in the south. (NOTE: During the visit of the USAID Administrator to Godeh in the Ogaden last month, local officials reported that in "normal" pre-conflict conditions, about 100 children would be suffering from malnutrition and require therapeutic feeding. The rates for just the Godeh area were now at 300. END NOTE.)

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Somalia and the Ogaden Interconnected  
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¶8. (SBU) The group recognized that Somalia and the Ogaden are interconnected. So long as Ethiopian troops are in Somalia, the potential for increased anti-Ethiopian sentiment. NGOs and the U.S. side raised the point that the ONLF operates out of Somalia in conducting operations in Ethiopia, and extremist elements are also entering Ethiopia from Somalia. WFP and other NGOs reported that Somaliland truckers refuse to drive into the rural areas of the Ogaden for fear of landmines and insurgency/counterinsurgency operations.

Truckers have raised prices significantly to deliver food, according to the NGOs. In addition, UN agencies raised fears that they cannot send their people to parts of the rural areas because of insecurity, landmines and rebel activities.

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U.S.-led interventions  
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¶9. (SBU) The U.S. raised briefly the visits of USAID Administrator Henrietta Fore to Godeh and the Secretary's recent visit. The group also discussed the visit of UN under secretary Sir John Holmes, and the EU Ambassadors reviewed

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their EU troika visit to Jijiga and meeting with Prime Minister Meles. The Ambassadors' group also raised their meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Adissu and with the DPPA chief. The message was consistent--while access has improved, the situation can potentially worsen if food in larger volumes are not delivered to the region, specifically to secondary rural distribution points. While the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister reportedly pushed back on the degree of severity of the problems in the Ogaden, the group felt that conditions, if not alleviated soon, will potentially lead to an emergency humanitarian situation.

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Other Comments/Way Ahead  
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¶10. (SBU) Despite continued reports, the group raised the lack of specific evidence of cantonment camps by the Ethiopian military or of systematic burning of villages.

¶11. (SBU) The group designated the U.S. to come up with new approaches to share with the group in the next U.S. Embassy-hosted meeting on what further actions are needed in working with the GOE to alleviate potentially worsening conditions in the Ogaden. Further, concerns were raised that the perception gap between the GOE and the NGOs/donor group could create friction and undercut efforts to meet the problems in the Ogaden.

¶12. (SBU) The U.S. side underscored the need for a consistent messages delivered by all participants, as well as for the

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donor nations to secure more assistance. The U.S. is leading the way with USD 18.7 million donated last August and another USD 25 million in food aid delivered since August. Further, USAID will send a small assessment team that will help determine the needs and extent of problems in the Ogaden. The U.S. side stressed that the messages continue to be: need to get large quantities of food to rural areas, lift restrictions on commercial food and livestock trade, work with WFP and UN agencies on monitoring the region and food distribution, working with WFP on areas where escorts are not necessary and those insecure areas to speed up military escorts.

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COMMENT: U.S. EFFORTS SHOWING RESULTS, MUCH STILL TO DO  
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¶13. (SBU) The December 14 meeting proved frustrating. While efforts led by the U.S. have resulted in positive forward movement in opening access for NGOs and UN food distribution to major towns, reports from the NGO community in particular indicate that the situation is still very volatile. If food does not reach the rural areas quickly and in significant amounts, child mortality rates and famine-like conditions will increase. Post will continue to lead efforts among the NGO-UN-Donor group to develop new approaches with the GoE to address these concerns. The U.S. will also continue to be the lead element in working with the GOE on alleviating the

situation because of the special access the U.S. has with senior GOE officials. Further, the USAID assessment team will be an important support mechanism to assess needs and strongly supported by the group to verify the degree and extent of problems in the Ogaden. END COMMENT.  
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